DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 926 JC 970 089

TITLE	Atlanta Metropolitan College, Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground. Progress Report.
INSTITUTION	Atlanta Community Coll., GA.
SPONS AGENCY	American Association of Community Colleges, Washington, DC.; National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Jan 97
NOTE	6p.; In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book (New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997); see JC 970 087.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	American Studies; *Community Colleges; *Cultural Pluralism; Culture; Curriculum Development; *Discussion; History Instruction; Instructional Improvement; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Literature; *Multicultural Education; Program Descriptions; Two Year Colleges; *United States History; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS	Atlanta Metropolitan College GA

ABSTRACT

In 1996, Atlanta Metropolitan College (Georgia) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. In an attempt to enhance the college's curriculum with American pluralism and identity issues, the college team developed an action plan to revise the teaching of humanities and history and to provide opportunities for the college community to find common ground as they explored what it means to be an American. A Plurality and Diversity Task Force was established, which held discussions regarding campus-wide multiculturalism and identity issues. Faculty met to discuss their syllabi, textbooks, and materials. Three day and three evening assemblies were held which featured lecture-forums addressing multicultural themes. Students in the history and humanities classes visited ethnic clubs on campus and exhibits at museums. "Brown Bag Lunch" informal discussions and a Christmas concert highlighting the celebration of Christmas by various cultures were held. Obstacles to the project included: a lack of automatic substantial enrollments due to the courses' status as non-core elective courses; a lack of funding; and an approach that did not maximize supervisory or recruitment efforts. Faculty and students agreed that the opportunity for freedom of expression and creative individualism are two of the most important elements of common ground for Americans. (HAA)

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Atlanta Metropolitan College, Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of common Ground

Progress Report

Atlanta Community College, GA

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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ATLANTA METROPOLITAN COLLEGE

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Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground

Progress Report 12/17/96

Atlanta Metropolitan College, an urban, two-year non-residential unit of the University System of Georgia, began classes in September, 1974. Located in the Southwest section of the city, the College seeks to provide..."affordable, accessible and relevant educational programs to a student population diverse in age and in ethnic, racial, social, political and cultural backgrounds."

The College enrolls 1982 students in three types of degree-granting programs, including forty three transfer programs for students pursuing baccalaureate degrees; nine career programs for students seeking academic preparation for employment; and thirteen joint programs with Atlanta Area Technical School to complement vocational/technical certification. Additionally, the College offers eleven certificate programs in specialized occupational fields. Through the Division of Continuing Education, the College also offers one hundred and nine non-credit courses, workshops and seminars, aimed toward personal development and skills enhancement for one thousand four hundred and one individuals within the community.

In an attempt to enhance teaching and learning about American pluralism and identity, the Atlanta Metropolitan College team developed an action plan which proposed to revise and prepare for teaching Humanities 101 and History 232. Secondly, the plan proposed to provide opportunities for the greater college community to seek and find "common ground" as students, faculty and staff explored the notion of what it means to be an American.

The entire College family has addressed the objectives of the grant through a number of activities. Following initial meetings with key administrators of the College, an expanded Plurality and Diversity Task Force was established which included representation from all major campus units. The task force held several discussions relevant to the means for implementing campus-wide multiculturalism and diversity. In addition, faculty teams from the Divisions of Humanities and Fine Arts, and Social Science met and discussed course syllabi revisions, probable textbooks, and pertinent materials to be used in targeted courses.

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In addition to the revision of History 232 and Humanities 101, Humanities 102 was also revised to allow for an indepth look at common ground issues. A faculty-staff forum addressed the theme and worked on basic definitions and terms that are utilized campus-wide. Three day and three evening assemblies were held which featured lecture-forums addressing the theme. Thus, the entire campus community, along with visitors from the broader community, had the opportunity to hear lectures by actress and producer Pamela Poitier, novelist Faye McDonald Smith and attorney Patricia Russell McCloud and follow up with questions, answers and general large group discussions of what it means to be an American; what divides us; what brings us together; and what we have in common.

While each of the three revised courses was scheduled for the Fall, 1996 Quarter, only two of the courses materialized. History 232 was cancelled due to insufficient enrollment. Nevertheless, Humanities 101, which was retitled Exploring Selected American Cultures: African American, Hispanic American and Asian American, and Humanities 102, African American Culture II, were very successful as revised courses. In each of the classes the students and the teacher sat in a circle to expedite the conversation format. Each day the class freewrote about the reading materials for the day. Following the writing, the class employed "read arounds" where everyone read and was heard; then discussion followed. The Humanities 101 class invited an Hispanic and a Korean speaker to address the class, while the Humanities 102 class invited a high school culture class to participate in their thematic exploration of "Role Models-In Search of Heroes". Students identified their personal role models and heroes. Using Nix's "Characteristics of a Hero", they evaluated their choices to determine whether each met the criteria.

Students in Humanities 101 visited a Latin American Club to experience Latin music and the Crosby Museum to view the African American Women's Art Exhibition. Students in Humanities 102 took field trips to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, The Carter Presidential Center and to Gullah Country, an Island near Beaufort, S.C. Both classes had students to visit the African American Heritage Library to view a photographic display featuring scenes from various African American communities across the nation.

"Brown Bag" Lunch conversations were held in the student snack bar where the international students club members and humanities class members informally discussed the need for various American sub-cultures to actively seek common ground. As the quarter progressed, these group chats became larger with students from throughout the campus joining the conversations. In addition, the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts sponsored a Christmas Concert Luncheon on December 3rd. The musical and dramatic renditions highlighted the celebration of Christmas by various cultures. The meal served featured authentic Jamaican cuisine, in honor of the large Caribbean subculture in the city.

Even though it is generally felt by college constituents that the project has gone well, there have been some obstacles. First of all, the two courses identified for revision were non-core electives; thus, substantial enrollments were not automatic.

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Resultantly, History 232, Minorities in American History, did not make this quarter. More vigorous recruiting must occur prior to registration for Spring Quarter when the course will be rescheduled.

Secondly, the greatest perceived obstacle was the lack of funding for the project. The Division's budget is extremely limited. When expenditures are made for long distance conference calls, trips, new materials and incidentals related to project implementation, a hardship is placed on the Division.

Finally, we now recognize that it would have been wiser to have revised courses taught in the Humanities and Fine Arts Division first. By so doing, greater supervision of project activities could have been exercised and greater effort to recruit students for all project classes would have been exerted.

The three revised courses will be rescheduled for the Spring, 1997 Quarter. Additional assemblies, featuring guest lecturers, are being scheduled for the remainder of the academic term.

Moreover, the College will co-sponsor the 1997 HBCU Faculty Development Seminar during which our team leader will chair the diversity committee assuming the responsibility of programming all of the sessions which will address the issue of cultural diversity.

In January, the team will complete its evaluation of the project and have the findings available at the National Conference in New Orleans.

Conversations regarding "American Plurality and Identity" have been spirited, honest, and forthright. Individuals have sought fervently to come to grips with their own identity, their acceptance (or lack of acceptance) of diverse groups within the academic community and the greater community. Many myths about multiculturalism have been examined. Individuals and groups have begun to seriously probe the meaning of Americanism. Students have made a more careful analysis of their own multiple heritages.

Faculty and students have vocalized what they consider as being American. Students expressed such issues as "having equal protection under the law;" "having the freedom to express one's self;" "being able to practice cultural traditions;" "having the opportunity to pursue your personal, social, political, economic and religious goals;" and "having the freedom to pursue the ideal of social equality and material success."

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Faculty determined that to be an American means that we are a nation of immigrants that has been transformed over time into a diverse people with a common heritage who believe in the principles of liberty and freedom. We are very conscious of the three great waves of immigrants to the United States which resulted in the current composition of America. The first great wave was before the Civil War with Northwestern Europeans; the second great wave was after the Civil War with Southern and Eastern Europeans and the third great wave was after World War II with Hispanics and Asians. As a predominately black college we are very much aware that African Americans were brought to the U.S. as slaves prior to the Civil War. The assimilation of these groups and the unique cultures in each into a system which embraces democracy has from time to time caused division in the process of Americanization. The principles of individual liberty and freedom in a democratic system are what brings the people of America together.The benefits reaped from the principles utilizing this process and their impact upon our daily lives are what the American people have in common. How these principles should be embraced and what all Americans have in common are discussed in detail in U.S. and Georgia Government and Minorities in American History courses taught at Atlanta Metropolitan College.

Students determined that Americans are divided by ancestral heritage, race, religious beliefs, geographic location, age, gender, economic status, educational attainment, sexual preference, and the belief that some human beings are superior to others. Paradoxically, however, Americans are brought together by common goals, shared language, similar interests, cross-cultural communication, like values, national traditions, shared holidays, positive attitudes and even catastrophic occurrences which make us realize that all humans deserve the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Consequently, students feel that Americans share many areas of common ground including the need for personal comfort and dignity, the desire for financial security, the belief in a power superior to ourselves, the desire to experience success, the requirement to abide by the laws of the country, the opportunity to develop to one's full potential, and the right to practice the customs, traits and language of people who share allegiance to the United States.

Finally, faculty and students alike agree that the opportunity for freedom of expression and creative individualism are considered two of the most important elements of "common ground" which Americans possess.

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